

Stories Worth the Telling - June 22, 2014: Spike gets spiked

<http://www.northjersey.com/news/education/spike-gets-spiked-1.1039707>

A few months after the incident at the Blue Ridge Beagle Club, where my dog Yellow Creek Spike created a scene by lifting his leg against the back of Cliff Miller's leg, I got a call from my father at Merchiston Farm where he was caretaker. Future columns will be printed about the how and why of him getting this job that he was so well suited for.

The owner of the 100-acre estate had given him permission to raise beagle hounds for hunting or field trials that he sold to increase his income from a job that provided him with a house, but not that great a salary.

He called to ask me to bring Spike down. My dog was actually a very good rabbit-hunting dog, his major fault (besides being a little nuts) was if he picked up the scent of a deer, he would run it. George Miller, my mother's second husband, had suggested loaning me the shock collar he used to break fox hounds from running deer, but I had not done so yet.

My father wanted to use Spike to sire beagle pups to sell to hunters or field trial people.

My teenage brother Stuart was living with my father and his new stepmother Louisa, and also working on the farm. Using the sickle bar mower in one of the fields, he cut right over the top of a fawn tightly curled up in a depression in the field of long grass, an instinctive defensive position. With its spots and the fact that it was too young to have a scent, for the most part, it was safe from predators. It was not harmed by the mower. Stuart kept an eye out for the mother, but she was not around, which was unusual, so he took it home, bottle fed it, and started to raise it. He called it Kiki. Developing into what we call a button buck, it had the run of the place.

One Sunday we put Spike in the back of our Ford station wagon. I had fixed it so he could not get in the front and drive my wife crazy. Then we headed down to the Gladstone area and the farm on Longview Road.

We pulled in between the house and barn. Spike was going nuts in the back. I opened the door and he shot out into the barn in full voice, like the dog food ad, "Bacon, bacon, I smell bacon." Seconds later, we heard a lot of yelping and howling as Spike raced back out limping badly with his tail tucked between his legs as far as it would go. He hid behind our car. He had just met Kiki and the barn was his home. Spike found out quickly that even a very small deer could hurt you bad with those front feet. He had been stomped, and needless to say, no pups were conceived that day.

Stories Worth the Telling - July 6, 2014:

Homesteading

<http://www.northjersey.com/news/education/homesteading-1.1047024>

At the last minute I decided to continue with my mother and get back to my father later.

Last week was about my mother rabbit hunting in Newfoundland, with her Fox 20 gauge and Spike, who you have read about before. Besides being a very good rabbit dog, he had shown definite signs of a mental disorder or a very warped doggie sense of humor.

We all, when given the chance, will talk at length about how unique our mothers were, which I will do in this and other columns. Edythe Hangreaves was born Feb. 22, 1907 in Newark, to a family tree with all its roots except the Conklins' planted in New Jersey soil before the Revolution. The year she was born, her father was an electrician's mate aboard the Cruiser St. Louis with The Great White Fleet. It had reached the California coast after a trip around South America.

He applied for and received a hardship discharge because he had a wife and newborn daughter back East that needed him. After stops along the way for work, while hitchhiking back East, he made it before my mother was 2 years old. I am reluctant to admit this, but like my dog, I have never claimed my ancestors were normal.

I have a picture of her when she was 15 with her Girl Scout troop by a church in East Orange. At 16, she was in Minnesota with her parents. At 17 she earned a diploma from the Business College in Bemidji, Minn. At 18 she was married and honeymooned with my father, Herbert Hannah, in Superior National Forest, on his motorcycle towing camping gear behind on a 2-wheeled flatbed cart.

At 19 she had her first child Russell (the author), and was helping to set up the 50-acre homestead she and my father filed on in Grant Valley, Minn., some distance from her parents' homestead at Cass Lake. The following is from her diary.

1927 through October 1928. June 1928 Irene is born. We filed for 50 acres under the Homestead Act. Cleared 10 acres, built log home and barn with the help of Bert's brothers Bill, Emerson, and Ken. Through fall and winter gathered White Pine cones to sell to the state. We hunted wolves for bounty (\$15 for female wolf). We worked on clearing more land, and planting Alfalfa, potatoes, rutabaga. Put meat on the table by fishing and hunting.

October moved into cabin. Put cows, pigs, horses in partitioned barn, and chickens in henhouse. We dug a well. No electric, no money. Bert found work in Bemidji 9 miles away, his mother took Russell for 2 months while I stayed with Irene and my 22 to keep wolves away from livestock to fulfill 6 month residency requirement.

Stories Worth the Telling - July 13, 2014: No money, no work = homestead failure

<http://www.northjersey.com/news/education/no-money-no-work-homestead-failure-1.1050695>

In my last column, my father had a small job in Bemidji, Minn., and I am with my grandmother. My mother lived on the homestead alone with her 4-month-old daughter and her 22-caliber rifle to establish residency. Things did not get better; they got worse. With the Depression looming, the lumber industry around Bemidji collapsed. There was no work, homesteaders failing everywhere, and land reverting to the state. My mother's parents sold theirs for a small sum because it was on a lake. That money got them, my parents, me, and my baby sister back East to my mother's family roots buried deep in the soil of historic New Jersey.

In 1931 after low-pay, part-time jobs near Newark, my father, Herbert E. Hannah, landed a job driving horse and/or mule teams for Newark's Pequannock River Watershed, something he learned in the lumber camps by age 16. He used to tell me about working for Cap Reilly on the watershed. That led to a caretaker/farmer job that came with a house for Earl Hines Sr. on Stowaway Farm at the beginning of the recently flooded Pinecliff Lake (in West Milford).

In the period between leaving Minnesota and moving into the house on Stowaway Farm, my mother had given birth to another boy and girl. Another boy was to be born at Stowaway in 1938.

A few years ago, I uncovered a legend about the house we lived in on Stowaway Farm being called "the Slave House." Here, legend claimed LaRue provided a home for his freed slaves who worked his grist mill, standing below the dam and falls on Belcher's Brook, which fed Pinecliff Lake.

In 1932 I started school in West Milford – eight grades, one room, one teacher, Mrs. Brower. Familiar area names in the school with me were Rhinesmith, Hall, Pulis, and the Davis girls to name a few. My sister Irene started a year later, upset because she was a grade behind. That did not last very long; within four years she skipped and was in the same grade. I believe it was something my mother and the teacher cooked up, but she did pass the test. We were both straight A's until an ego-deflating first year at Barringer in Newark.

The fields and stone fences at Stowaway were loaded with copperheads. Rattlers were a different story, and I knew where they were. Besides the cellar of the empty Olden House overlooking the lake, they would lay in the sun in a blueberry patch with large rocks at the edge of a pasture near the lake. I would tease them with a long pole to get them to coil and rattle for my sister Irene, who near the end of her life two years ago still called me, "Big Brother." Bob Shortell of West Milford gave us 25 cents to show him where they were, an act that upset my 6-foot-tall, all-muscle, former lumberjack father.

Stories Worth The Telling - July 20, 2014: Divorce

<http://www.northjersey.com/news/education/family-breakup-1.1054470>

I do not remember if my father drank before taking the caretaker job for Earl Hines in West Milford. I was 6 years old when we came to Stowaway Farm. I do not believe he drank during his first few years at Stowaway. By the time I was 10 I knew he drank, and where.

When he did, this good-natured man became a different person. If he came home drunk from Hunters Rest on Union Valley Road, he could become violent at a moment's notice. I avoided him, but my mother could not and often bore the brunt of this violence. I was never to find out the reason for this, since neither she nor he ever spoke about it after the divorce, even after both had remarried, and he stopped drinking some time during World War II.

I was to see the stupidity of getting drunk, besides the violence I had seen, when I was 12. One night in October of 1938, a beat-up old car with a bunch of his barroom buddies roared up to our house on the dirt entrance road and hollered for my sober father to get his shotgun and come with them to a town meeting in West Milford. This scared us kids very badly. Much later that night we heard a car come in, and the kitchen door slam. My sister Irene and I sneaked part way down the stairs to hear our sober father yelling at my mother about those damn fools, and their car full of guns.

By now most of you have figured out that this was about Orson Welles' famous Martian invasion radio broadcast. We would have heard that broadcast ourselves, but a tube had burned out in the radio, and we could not use it until my father was able to go to Butler for a tube.

In 1939 my mother left my father, her parents came up from Newark, and the family was split up, with my brother Stuart and sister Shirley staying behind with our father and Grandma Hannah and her teenage daughter, my aunt Ethel. They had come to New Jersey from Bemidji to live after Grandpa Ernest Hannah had died and was buried in the Ferris plot in the Bemidji Cemetery.

My sister Irene, baby brother Gordon, me, and my mother were now living in Newark on the corner of Seventh Avenue and Fourth Street in a large house that my grandparents rented, and with our grandmother's aunt Nellie Norwood, the very-hard-of-hearing, old maid, family gadabout and news gatherer.

Irene and I started seventh grade at Garfield Grammar School, and my mother started a secretary course at the YWCA to catch up on what she had learned in business school, get a job, and get on with her life at age 32.

Stories Worth the Telling - Aug. 30, 2014: Father and son

<http://www.northjersey.com/news/education/father-and-son-1.1078935>

When I came home from the war in 1946, I had not seen my father Bert Hannah in several years. This was because of the divorce of my parents due to his tendency toward violence when drinking – a habit he had acquired after several years working for Mr. Earl Hines on Stowaway Farm in West Milford. After the war began, he left his caretaker farmer job for Earl Hines and took a job in the war industry at a factory in Belleville. He had quit drinking, I suspect because of a serious car accident during the war.

During the war, he met and married Louisa Franks who worked at the same war plant with him. My brother Stuart went to live with them. He stayed with them when my father, at the end of the war, took the caretaker's job at Merchiston Farm on Longview Road near Gladstone. Bert and his small family moved into the caretaker's house. It was his home until his death in 1985 at the age of 81, long after Mrs. Hutcheson's death in 1959 and Merchiston Farm becoming Bamboo Brook, a Morris County park.

I took a train to Gladstone, where my father picked me up. I stayed at the farm for a week and put a small part of my family back together, now that he had quit drinking.

While walking down the drive toward the big house I met my father's boss, Martha Brookes Hutcheson. Although I did not know this at that time, she was one of the earliest licensed female landscape architects in the United States. As she walked toward me with her cane and pince-nez glasses on a chain held up to her eyes, her comment was, "You must be Russell."

She asked me what I intended to do now that I was home. I told her about the house construction boom that was about to start in northern NJ due to the GI bill, and thought I might get a job in it. She then asked me to follow her to the house. Entering, she led me to a room with a big pool table, like a billiard table. Mystified, I watched her take a deck of cards and make houses out of three cards close together in rows on the green felt. She had very steady hands for an old lady.

Then she told me to picture them as a housing development, and what did I see? When I told her I saw a bunch of houses too close together with driveways separating them and green lawns, she told me that there were developers who were going to build these by the thousands too close together with no landscaping of any kind. This great eccentric old lady told me, "Russell, do not work for people that build like that, without landscaping!"

Stories Worth the Telling - Sept. 7, 2014: Willowwood & Bamboo Brook

<http://www.northjersey.com/towns/willowwood-bamboo-brook-1.1083176>

After the death of my father, Herbert Hannah at the age of 81 in 1985, in the caretaker's house on Bamboo Brook Park, once known as Merchiston Farm. My sister Irene, per our father's request, spread his ashes on the hill separating the two parks.

This hill, that my father more than once described as having an ability to produce vibrations that could be felt and sounds like groans from deep within it that he could hear, rises the other side of Bamboo Brook to a knoll and then down a short distance to the edge of the tree line overlooking fields that continue down to one of the Willowwood roads.

Just inside the tree line overlooking Willowwood fields is a very big split rock over 6 feet in height. Over the years, a great many people had trespassed on this property to knock pieces from this unusual rock which has been identified as a glacial erratic. Mrs. Hutcheson, owner of Merchiston Farm had my father put a stop to this as soon as he and his new second wife Louisa and my teenage brother Stuart moved into the caretaker's house in 1945.

This ex-Minnesota lumberjack from Paul Bunyan country, ex-farmer caretaker for Earl Hines on Stowaway Farm in West Milford in the 1930s, and ex-World War II factory worker in Bellville soon became a totally dedicated and trustworthy employee of Martha Brooks Hutcheson, one of the earliest female landscape architects in U.S. history.

The split rock that Mrs. Hutcheson's grandson Chip Norton and granddaughter Lucia Norton Woodruff had once thought was a meteorite, had a large stone buried in the ground behind it that served as a perfect seat for a deer stand. It was the favorite spot for my father during deer season to sit and wait for a shot through the split at a buck on the edge of the field. It was during these waits that he heard the groans from deep beneath this rock and felt the earth vibrate through the rock he was seated on many times over the years.

During one deer season when he got mad at me because he thought I did not believe his stories about the rock, he had me take his stand behind the split rock. For several hours, I sat there and watched dozens of deer pass by just out of gunshot range, as hunters drove them off the huge Hamilton Farm, home of the US Equestrian Team. I began to feel strange vibrations through my seat on the rock, but did not hear any sounds. I now had to believe his stories about this strange hill where the split in the split rock got wider every year, and strange small stone formations could be found beside stones with seashell outlines embedded in them.

Stories Worth the Telling - Nov. 16, 2014: Riding to the hounds

<http://www.northjersey.com/news/education/riding-to-the-hounds-1.1135154>

Before the Nortons turned over the 104-acre estate inherited from Martha Norton's mother, Martha Brookes Hutcheson, to Morris County to become Bamboo Brook Park, she had forbade a local fox hunt club to cross her property. The story my father told was of a young female rider falling and being injured badly crossing the property before he became caretaker there, soon after World War II ended.

The ban continued while he was caretaker, although he became friendly with the riders. Passing the entrance to the property on Longview Road, they stopped and talked to him if he was working near the road. He was well known to the directors of the Essex Hunt over the years because of their fox hounds showing up at his house injured, or hungry after being separated from the pack. He fed and cared for them. Then he returned them to the kennels at the club.

The Hunt Club began in the 1870s in the Hackensack area of New Jersey with a beagle hound pack. As the club grew larger it acquired true fox hounds for the pack. Requiring larger quarters they kept moving until they finally settled in the Peapack Gladstone area with the over 5,000 acres of the Brady Estate/Hamilton Farms to ride on the hunt. It abutted MRS Hutcheson's property about 100 yards up the hill across the hay fields from the out buildings, my father's kennels, garden, and above what is now a Bamboo Brook parking area.

A pack of the unique American fox hounds could be from 15 to 25 hounds running at once. This unique breed was developed from the Irish, English, and French hounds brought here by very early settlers, with George Washington being one of the early breeders.

The musical baying of this many hounds pursuing a fox could be heard for miles. They were highly trained and controlled by the hunt master with his horn until they got on a fox.

A few days after my father's death, my sister Irene, wife Florence, and a few other family members were standing around behind the caretaker's house talking to park employees about my father's tools. Florence with her very keen hearing said she heard hounds coming.

Walking out to where we could see up the hill, out into the hay field rode the entire Essex Hunt in full dress riding habits, on beautiful horses, with the hunt master calling in the hounds. At least 20 hounds could be seen milling about the horses. The hunt master in the center of that big half circle, sounded several notes on his horn, and they rode on.

What an honor was paid to Bert Hannah, this ordinary man who had once been a Minnesota lumberjack with a third-grade education, if that. Nobody had a camera, and most of on hand that day are gone, but that sight will live on in my mind until I draw my last breath.

Stories Worth The Telling - Dec. 14, 2014: Morris County Park Bamboo Brook and Bert Hannah

<http://www.northjersey.com/opinion/opinion-guest-writers/morris-county-park-bamboo-brook-and-bert-hannah-1.1153502>

Needing to get back to Bamboo Brook because of current events I am involved in at the Morris County Park Commission, I have left the story of the cast removal and search for work until I return.

When Martha Brookes Hutcheson died in 1959, my father Bert Hannah had been her caretaker for 14 years. This continued when Martha Hutcheson Norton inherited the estate from her mother.

The Nortons did not live on the estate, but came up from Princeton often for the weekends and summer months. Bert continued to care for the estate as if it were his. He did not need to be told what to do or be supervised. He just did what had to be done and thought nothing of the hours it took.

The Norton children, Lucia and Chip, spent a lot of time hanging around with my father and brother Stuart and got to ride with them on the farm tractor. While corresponding with Lucia Norton Woodruff a few years ago at her home in Austin, Texas (where she had been a violinist with the Austen Symphony Orchestra), she told me she was so impressed with Bert's tales, that she kept a diary of his tales about his life in Minnesota.

His upkeep of the property continued until, in 1972 the Nortons made the decision, one that Bert was involved in, to give the property to Morris County. They would be required to maintain and restore it to the condition of its glory days before World War II, just as Martha Brookes Hutcheson had planned, landscaped, and built it. (The county has done this magnificently with Bamboo Brook Park.)

At 68 Bert continued to receive his salary from the county and live in the caretaker's house the rest of his life. During the 13 years he maintained the property for the Nortons, they gave him permission to use the out buildings, farm, and do whatever he could to bring in a bit of money over what the estate was paying him. He had a big garden every year, and Lou canned everything. They even raised and sold chickens.

Anyone knowing Bert's love of horses, knew he would find and bring home a couple, and he did. He also found a couple of registered beagles and began raising them to sell to hunters. It was inevitable that people coming to buy a beagle for hunting would get him involved in raising field trial capable beagle hounds.

One of these, his pride and joy Longview Susie became a star on the field trial circuit. Winning field trial after field trial, she became an AKC field champion. Not stopping there, she was entered in an annual major field trial event in Pennsylvania where champions competed against each other. She beat 57 field champions from all over the United States becoming famous and her picture appeared in the sports section of a 1963 Newark Evening News.

Stories Worth The Telling - Dec. 21, 2014: Her name was dolly. 'Oh! how she could dance'

When my father brought home the Arabian he named Dolly, it was obvious that she had been neglected and treated very badly.. She was gaunt, dull coated, and her hooves were badly cracked. She was so afraid of people, that she shied away from any hand extended to her, and sometimes reared.

Dad had a way with horses. He had learned how to handle them as a teenager in the lumber camps around Bemidji, Minn. Badly hurt by a horse, he bore the mark for the rest of his life.

He gave rodeo a try, and was thrown and then accidentally stepped on by the bronc that was still bucking as he tried to ride. Years later he showed me and my sister Irene a large purple mark on his stomach, and told us, "Steamboat Bill did that to me" back in Minnesota. He never blamed that horse for his injury, and he never abused a horse except once, back on Stowaway Farm in West Milford. I think Soda got the best of it.

Dad finished cleaning out Soda's little brother Whiskey's stall, then went in to back Soda out so he could clean that one. Soda was a big plow horse, 1,500 pounds or better, and he leaned on Dad, pinning him against the side of the stall. It took Dad a long time to wiggle free.

Once free of the stall with Soda, boiling mad, red faced, and still gasping for air, he hauled off and hit Soda as hard as he could with his fist, right between the eyes.

Years later telling me about it, he bragged that he buckled Soda's front legs. I did not believe that for one minute. It was more likely that his knees buckled from the pain of almost breaking his hand on Soda's hard head.

Gradually after a couple of months, Dad had the complete trust of Dolly, who allowed him to saddle her, although she never trusted anyone except him. Up on her back he always claimed he could feel she was trying to tell him something, with her head held high, nickering softly. Then one evening she told him. When he was on her back for just a couple of minutes, she started to dance. Realizing at once what she was doing, he sat up straight and loosened his hold. With her head held high and neck slightly bowed she was doing dressage. (Dressage comes from the French word for training and pertains to a series of complex maneuvers.) Dolly knew all the steps and did them.

I never found out how he obtained her, and he knew nothing of her past. Both of them aging rapidly, they danced a couple of times a week. Dolly passed away peacefully and happy. Somewhere on Bamboo Brook Dad buried her.

As a visitor to the park in the evening when the mists begin to rise down the road toward Bamboo Brook, and you imagine you see a horse, head held high in the mists, it is just Dolly trying to find my father's ashes.

Stories Worth the Telling - Jan. 4, 2015: Dad decides the farm needs watch dogs?

<http://www.northjersey.com/news/education/dad-decides-the-farm-needs-watch-dogs-1.1186096>

Editor's note: Unfortunately many of Russ Hannah's stories will never get told here in the pages of Suburban Trends because he passed away on Monday, Dec. 29. We will dedicate the next few weeks to columns written by this historian with a knack for humor. See his obituary on A9.

Martha had passed away, and the big house full of antiques and paintings sat empty unless the Nortons who now owned the property were spending some time there. This situation worried my father, and he decided watchdogs were needed to protect the place from thieves, both human and animal.

One summer afternoon as Florence and I turned off Longview Road into the Merchiston Farm for a visit with my father. We had the car windows down, and she threw her hands up over her ears and yelled, "What is that God-awful noise?". Looking around, I saw a few large birds fly up into a big tree. I had no idea what they were, but that was the source of all the clatter.

Once behind the caretaker's house the racket stopped, and my father came out, grabbed, and hugged Florence, who he was very fond of telling "I heard you coming."

Right away Florence got on him about his bad hearing. "You did not hear us; it was those awful birds," she said.

As we headed into the house where Lou was waiting to greet us, we could hear my father say with a broad grin at Florence, "I bet when the wind is right they can hear them down in Gladstone."

Inside, sitting around the table in that big kitchen, he told us about his guinea hens. Florence told Lou that if she lived there she would have to wear hearing protection day and night. Dad just laughed and said he said he had about 15 of them, but the flock would get bigger quite fast, and they roamed the place at will. He bragged that no human thief would dare to set foot on the property. And no animal thief such as a fox, raccoon, or weasel could get near the chicken enclosure without the hysterical screeching call to arms of those ugly birds sounding far and wide.

(I did some research to make sure what I remembered about the guinea hens was correct and found that my father was a very smart man. The following is what he did not tell us. They were called guinea fowl and the flock could get as large as 50 birds. No mouse, rat, small snake, tick, nor any insect, horse fly or deer fly or garden pest, which they gobbled up without harming any garden plant, was safe from their voracious appetites.)

As we left that day to go home we were greeted again, this time with car windows closed. Once again Florence complained about those ugly screeching birds. Teasing her I likened the noise to the maniac wailing of a boat load of the condemned being ferried across the River Styx by Charon. Glaring at me, her expression said, "What the hell are you talking about?"

Stories Worth the Telling - Jan. 18, 2015: A wake for Bert Hannah at Bamboo Brook

<http://www.northjersey.com/news/education/a-wake-for-bert-hannah-at-bamboo-brook-1.1223168>

Two yoke of cattle, a large yeller dog. A tall Shanghai Rooster, and a one spotted hog singing too-ra-li-oo-ra-li-oo-ra-li-ay.

Knowing Bert Hannah, you knew he loved old hill country music, and "Sweet Betsy", that old California Gold Rush song, was a favorite plus a couple of the old-style hymns. Square dancing was a much-loved pastime, and if square dance music began blasting out of the radio on top of the refrigerator while we were visiting, it was not unusual for him to make a grab for Florence and whirl her around that big kitchen.

My sister Irene had taken our father's ashes to spread on the hill separating Bamboo Brook from WillowWood. It was now time for his wake to be held in what we called the music room, where that magnificent pipe organ once stood. Music would be provided by his nephew, my Aunt Ethel's son Otto Tommy Zappo, and his granddaughter Lore Zacksher, my sister Shirley's daughter.

Otto Tommy (Zappo The Great) was a professional who had appeared on Channel 13, and traveled all over New Jersey including Kinnelon, entertaining school children dressed as a king's minstrel playing various stringed instruments and singing the very old songs of an early America.

Lore Zacksher was a very tall outspoken girl with a magnificent voice. At 16 she had been singing in a church choir for four years in Connecticut. That year, choir singers from all over New England were being selected to join a large touring group of choir singers to sing in the Cathedrals of England, France, and Italy. Lore was selected and became one of the lead singers. During her tour we received a letter from her complaining about Italian men being far too free with their hands, and the next one that pinched her bottom was going to get decked, even if it created an international incident.

In 2006 Lore who never had the desire to sing professionally, but did sing at weddings and funerals, sent me her great recording of inspirational songs, and an oral message when I lost my left leg below the knee.

Visit Bamboo Brook and admire the job the park system has done there. Stand quietly behind the great house where the music room windows look out upon those landscaped grounds and listen. The many kind words spoken by so many people, and the great old music and hymns played to honor an honorable man will echo here forever.

Looking toward Bamboo Brook you may see an elderly woman with a big two-pocket apron kneeling and working at the base of a plant. Coming up the lane from the brook you may see a handsome little beagle hound dancing around the feet of a high-stepping Arabian who has an aging solid, friendly-looking man astride her with a big happy smile.

Martha, Bert, Longview Susie, and Dolly are waiting to welcome you to their home.